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Significance-Quest Theory

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Abstract

Even though the motivation to feel worthy, to be respected, and to matter to others has been identified for centuries by scholars, the antecedents, consequences, and conditions of its activation have not been systematically analyzed or integrated. The purpose of this article is to offer such an integration. We feature a motivational construct, the quest for significance, defined as the need to have social worth. This need is typically fulfilled by a sense of measuring up to the values one shares with significant others. Our significance-quest theory (SQT) assumes that the need for significance is universal, whereas the means of satisfying it depend on the sociocultural context in which one's values are embedded. Those means are identified in a *narrative* supported and validated by one's *network*, or reference group. The quest for significance is activated by significance loss and/or the opportunity for significance gain. It motivates behavior that aims to affirm, realize, and/or show commitment to an important value. The SQT is consistent with large bodies of prior research and supported by novel studies in multiple laboratory and field settings. It transcends prior understandings and offers guidance for further study of this essential human motivation.

Keywords

significance, mattering, narratives, networks

Don't be shocked when your hist'ry book mentions
me. . . Eventually, you'll see my ascendancy

—Lin Manuel Miranda, *Hamilton*

To be recognized is to exist.

—G. W. F. Hegel, *The Phenomenology of Spirit*

The quest for social worth is a universal motivation, an essential force animating human social behavior (e.g., Allport, 1955; Crocker & Park, 2004; Leary & Baumeister, 2000; Rosenberg, 1965; Solomon et al., 1991). We label it here the quest for significance, the desire to matter, to have dignity and merit respect. Significance issues have been of paramount interest to social thinkers over the centuries and have been addressed extensively in contemporary social psychology. We acknowledge these contributions and build on their insights, but our

main objective is to offer a novel conceptual framework that systematically identifies the antecedents, instigating conditions, and consequences of significance quest. We show how our significance-quest theory (SQT) accounts for prior findings and how it provides a basis for new predictions.

We first summarize our SQT and highlight its essential postulates. We then note how the concept of significance has been addressed in prior analyses. We also discuss our theory's postulates and implications and present empirical evidence for their validity. We conclude with a general discussion that highlights our theory's contributions and outlines possible avenues of future research under its guidance.

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In Essence

The quest for significance is the desire to matter, to feel worthy and appreciated by others whose positive regard one seeks. The belief in one's social worth derives from a sense of measuring up to one's internalized values, which typically are values one shares with significant others, or members of the group to which one belongs (Merton & Kitt, 1950; Siegel & Siegel, 1957). We assume that the quest for significance plays a key role in human affairs and hence has been selected for in the course of human evolution: Significance "questors" were likely to contribute to the welfare of their group and were therefore accorded status and prestige (Alexander, 1987; Willer, 2009). In turn, the group's gratitude and admiration likely contributed to individuals' survival and reproductive success (Whitten, 1987), explaining the prevalence of the significance quest in our species.

Stable differences in significance cravings determine the *potential* magnitude of this motivation: They set the upper bound of significance one might desire. This potential may be released in the appropriate situation. As with other basic needs (e.g., for nutrition or hydration), the quest for significance must first be situationally activated at a magnitude that puts it above other current concerns for it to have an impact on behavior.

Activation happens either via significance *deprivation* (i.e., a loss of significance due to rejection, exclusion, humiliation, or failure) or *incentivization* (through a perceived opportunity for recognition, e.g., performing a feat of heroism, or the presence of an audience whose admiration one is seeking). *Prevention-focused* individuals are likely to resonate to significance loss more than to significance gain, whereas *promotion-focused* individuals are likely to resonate more to the opportunity for significance gain (Higgins, 2012).

In addition, a way of attaining significance must be identified, a means to the end of significance. A significance-affording means is one that demonstrates a realization, or devotion, to a cherished, significance-lending value. Values may be attached to attributes, actions, and attainments the individual holds in high regard. Such values typically are ones that the individual's in-group deems of worth, as individuals' views on these and other matters are embedded in their community's "shared reality" (Higgins, 2019). Individuals who possess these attributes, carry out those actions, or accomplish those attainments are made to feel that they matter and merit respect. Thus, significance "trickles down" from abstract values to individuals who personify them.

The linkage between value and action/attributes that realize that value is typically spelled out in cultural narratives that depict respectable actions (e.g., fighting for freedom and democracy), manner of conduct (e.g.,

showing courage, honesty, kindness, and humility), and attributes (e.g., being of a higher caste, good-looking, married with children) as significance-affording. The narratives may differ substantially across different cultural communities. Some narratives highlight the link between humanitarian acts and significance. Others link significance to acts of courage and heroism on behalf of one's group. Yet others hail economic success, academic achievement, feats of athleticism, wealth, or beauty as meriting significance and recognition.

One's sense of significance may change with shifts in one's social milieu, for instance, on relocation to a different country, a different job, or a new institution (e.g., college, hospital, penitentiary) in which different values and ways of earning significance apply. Some shifts may occasion a loss of previously felt significance. Others may occasion a significance gain. This may happen if one's previously unappreciated qualities or talents were now accorded worth and admiration (the "ugly-duckling" effect).¹ Individual differences apply here as well: Some persons may have a relatively stable sense of self-worth that is resistant to the shifting social contexts through which they journey. The self-worth of others may fluctuate as a function of the shared reality of new groups that they entered (e.g., Gebauer et al., 2012; Kernis et al., 2008; Liu & Huang, 2018; Paradise & Kernis, 2002). Relatedly, some individuals are particularly sensitive to rejection in various domains, whereas others' "ego" is less fragile (Downey et al., 1994; Feldman & Downey, 1994).

In what follows we address in some detail the antecedents of the need for significance, its conditions of activating and instigating behavior, and its affective impact. Evidence that this need translates into real-world outcomes is embedded throughout. First, however, we briefly comment on the substantial scholarly background of this work.

Intellectual Heritage

Philosophy

The *striving for recognition* is among the most central concepts of social philosophy about which there exists a voluminous literature,² and it has been widely considered by philosophers a "vital human need" (Taylor, 1992, p. 26). The *struggle for recognition* has been addressed by major thinkers, including, among others, Aristotle, Mead, Fichte, Hegel, Marx, and Sartre. According to Honneth (1995), the struggle for dignity and recognition has underlain various social movements across history (including among others the French, American, and Russian revolutions) in which a social collectivity (members of a given social class, ethnicity, religion, nationality, or gender or sexual orientation), feeling deprived of significance, pulled their forces

together to fight what they perceived as injustice, undeserved slight, and disparagement.^{3,4}

Several volumes by eminent social thinkers highlight the loss of dignity and respect suffered by segments of the American society and analyze its pernicious consequences. The political scientist Fukuyama (2018) discusses how the demand for dignity and recognition fed the politics of resentment and the rise of populism. The economists Case and Deaton (2020) show how indignity-bred economic decline fomented rising rates of suicide among America's working class. And the philosopher Sandel (2020) shows how the narrative of meritocracy in the United States and elsewhere created classes of "winners" and "losers," inciting "the resentment against elites" that "has ultimately to do with . . . social recognition and esteem" (p. 22).

A detailed examination of social scientists' treatments (past and present) of dignity and respect is beyond the scope of this article. Suffice it to note that this aspect of human nature has received ample attention and has been considered a significant force for social change. Although rich in profound insight, social thinkers' mentions of the struggle for recognition typically have been cursory and have not delved into its antecedents, instigating conditions, and consequences. Naturally, the latter would seem to be particularly relevant to the discipline of psychology.

Psychology

Insights into various aspects of the quest for significance have appeared in multiple, widely dispersed bodies of research in social and personality psychology. Among lines of research relevant to this topic are studies of self-enhancement, self-protection, self-affirmation (Sherman & Cohen, 2006; Steele, 1998), self-esteem (Rosenberg, 1965), achievement motivation (McClelland, 1985; McClelland et al., 1953), the need to belong (Baumeister & Leary, 1995), social identity (Abrams & Hogg, 1988; Hogg, 1992, 1993; Tajfel & Turner, 1979), normative influence (Deutsch & Gerard, 1955), exclusion and inclusion (K. D. Williams, 2007), relative deprivation (Gurr, 1970; Stouffer et al., 1949; Pettigrew, 2001), and minority influence (Moscovici, 1985). In fact, much of social and personality psychology alludes to the human quest for significance, albeit via different terminology and tapping different aspects of the phenomenon.

Significance or esteem: What is in a name?

Our concept of significance is akin to such popular terms as self-respect, recognition, dignity, prestige, status, mattering, meaning in life, or self-esteem. The last

concept in particular enjoys a wide currency in psychological science and has been mentioned in numerous studies and review articles (e.g., Leary & Baumeister, 2000). Yet our concept of significance quest is distinct from self-esteem as such. Significance quest refers specifically to one's *social worth*, which, although often aligned with self-esteem, can diverge from it as well. One can have a high self-esteem yet a low social worth (e.g., a suffragette in the 1920s, a civil-rights leader in the 1960s, an immigrant or a refugee denied in the host country the social worth they enjoyed in their country of origin). Indeed, it is the low sense of social worth (rather than low self-esteem) that likely motivated social movements geared toward the restoration of one's group's dignity and respectful place in a society.

Our need for significance construct is broader from that of self-esteem as typically portrayed: We conceive of the need for significance as a preeminent social motive that subsumes such motives as competence, relatedness, the need to belong, and so on. By contrast, prior analyses of self-esteem (e.g., Crocker & Park, 2004) often juxtaposed it with the needs for competence and relatedness and viewed the pursuit of esteem as detrimental to the latter needs (p. 398).⁵ From the current perspective, however, competence in a culturally valued activity (e.g., academics or athletics) is evidence for significance, or a means to the end of significance. Autonomy betokens independence from others and hence self-sufficiency and effectiveness (Higgins, 2012), instilling a sense of pride and self-worth. In that sense, autonomy is also a means to the end of significance. Relatedness, belonging, and inclusion represent the acceptance of self by important others; it thus constitutes evidence for one's social significance or worth. In short, our use of the term "significance" rather than "self-esteem" comes to underscore the idea that a broadly based quest for social worth constitutes a motivational driver of large swaths of human social behavior.

In what follows, we outline a novel theory that addresses the antecedents, instigating conditions, and consequences of the quest for significance. Our theory builds on numerous prior findings and concepts while going beyond them and affording novel insights into what we consider a major motivational driver of human affairs.

The Psychology of Significance Quest

The need for significance

As already noted, by the need for significance we mean the motivation to have social worth. This means the desire to be respected by significant others in one's

social environment, people on whose positive evaluation one depends. A sense of significance is determined by one's perception of how one is evaluated by others, or members of the group to which one belongs. As implied earlier, one's self-worth is typically aligned with one's perception of how one is evaluated by others. This is not invariably true, however. There can be cases in which one's self-worth is determined by one's internalized values that do not correspond to the values of one's current group. Immigrants whose feelings of self-worth are anchored in their remembered significance in their country of origin may feel that members of the host country (the current group) view their worth very differently. One may then engage in behaviors that lend one self-worth (e.g., cultural rituals and practices from one's native tradition) without these behaviors bringing one social worth in the new environment.

Antecedents

Evolution. As noted earlier, the quest for significance and recognition likely has proffered a notable evolutionary advantage on individuals. According to Alexander (1987), for instance, indirect reciprocity for prosocial behavior involves "return . . . expected from someone other than the recipient of the beneficence," reputation, and status and "results in everyone in a social group continually being assessed and reassessed by interactants, past and potential, on the basis of their interactions with others" (p. 85). Reputation may significantly enhance the likelihood of individuals receiving support and protection from others in the group, which in turn may enhance the prospects of their survival and reproduction. As Bloom (2013) noted,

the logic of natural selection [is] that our altruistic and moralizing impulses should be discriminating—there is a strong reproductive benefit to being biased to favor friends and family over strangers, and one would expect this to be incorporated as part of an innate moral sense. (p. 151)

Prosocial behavior extends beyond favoritism toward friends and family and encompasses behavior that supports and protects the group's cherished ideals and sacred values, for which individuals are repaid by recognition and significance within their group (Atran, 2010).

Substantial anthropological research in small-scale societies provides empirical evidence for the status-fertility relation (e.g., Betzig, 1986). Specifically, male social status, accorded for wealth (Borgerhoff Mulder, 1987), hunting skill (Gurven & von Rueden, 2006; Kaplan & Hill, 1985; Smith, 2004), and warriorship

(Chagnon, 1988), were all found to be positively related to fertility, highlighting the possible evolutionary advantage (for males) that social significance may confer. There is also evidence consistent with these findings that ambition (a reasonable proxy for the need for significance)⁶ is a relatively highly inheritable trait (Wootton et al., 2017).

Socialization. Individual differences in the striving for significance are likely determined by parenting styles and socialization practices. Important work in developmental psychology has been devoted to this topic. Essentially, a high degree of the motivation for significance requires that the individual attach reasonably high value to having significance and reasonably high *expectancy* of attaining it (Kruglanski, Chernikova, et al., 2014). Both are typically instilled in children by their parents (Eccles et al., 1993). Different socialization strategies have stressed either the value or expectancy components of this equation. Concerning value, work on regulatory focus (e.g., Higgins, 1991; Higgins & Silverman, 1998) suggests that parenting that rewards desirable activities rather than punishing undesirable activities contributes to the child's development of a *promotion focus*, the emphasis on advancement and improvement (hence, ambition and the quest for significance).⁷ Such socialization encourages children to set for themselves high levels of aspirations and to be "reaching for the stars" (Grant-Halvorson, 2010). Concerning expectancy, work on fixed versus growth mindsets (Dweck, 2006) suggests that whereas children socialized into the former mindset are hampered in their goal pursuit by the fear (stemming from expectancy) of failure, those with the latter mindset are free to set their levels of aspiration as high as desired.

Culture. The cultural context in which individuals are embedded may determine the strength of their quest for significance. Cultures that emphasize social mobility, for instance, may augment individuals' ambition for greatness and glory. A telling example is the American Dream; James Truslow Adams (1931), who coined the term, put it this way: "Life should be better and richer and fuller for everyone, with opportunity for each according to ability or achievement" regardless of social class or circumstances of birth (Library of Congress, n.d.).

As a result of genetics, socialization, and culture, people vary widely in their quest for significance (Oskarsson et al., 2018; Tellegen et al., 1988). Some are voraciously ambitious (the likes of Julius Caesar, Cleopatra, Catharine the Great, Napoleon Bonaparte, Marie Curie, or Hitler). Others are meeker and less pretentious. Not everyone must be "a bride at every wedding, a corpse at every funeral, and a baby at every christening," as Alice Roosevelt Longworth reportedly characterized her

father Theodore. Yet hardly anyone wants to be ignored, disrespected, and humiliated; hardly anyone is indifferent to insults and discrimination.

Situational activation

No one quests for significance incessantly. Even the most ambitious individuals occasionally attend to other needs unrelated to significance in domains of leisure, entertainment, or relationships. To drive an operative quest, the need for significance must first be activated. As with other motivations, it can be activated in one of two general ways: through *deprivation* or *incentivization* (Kruglanski, Chernikova, et al., 2014). Deprivation pertains to loss of significance resulting from failure, humiliation, or rejection. A special case is that of a conditional deprivation, a threatened significance loss unless one acted in a certain way (e.g., volunteered for a dangerous mission for a cherished cause, made a costly sacrifice for an ideal; see Kruglanski et al., 2009, 2013; Kruglanski, Gelfand, et al., 2014). Incentivization pertains to a situational opportunity to experience an appreciable boost to one's significance. Notably, there are individual differences in sensitivity to events that challenge one's sense of significance (i.e., instances of rejection, humiliation, or failure; e.g., Downey et al., 1994; Kernis et al., 2008), as well as to events that offer the opportunity for significance gain (Higgins, 1997).⁸

Significance bestowal: a matter of value

Social worth derives from a societal value that one upholds through one's conduct and/or embodies through one's attributes (see Atran, 2010; Higgins, 2012). One is said to *possess* value (significance) as a person if one exhibits devotion to a cherished social value, particularly if one proves it through sacrifices made on the value's behalf. The more important (or "sacred") the value the greater the worth attached to those who realize it in their attributes or actions.

For instance, the in-group's welfare and safety are widely cherished in most communities (see Haidt & Graham, 2007). Individuals who show commitment to their in-group are generally accorded status and prestige (Willer, 2009). In this vein, service in the military bestows glory and glamour in most nations because societies are grateful and pay special respect to their "men and women in uniform." To be sure, one's group's survival and welfare are hardly the only significance-lending values. Depending on the sociocultural context a host of other values can bestow significance, such as physical and social power (Keltner et al., 2003; Kipnis, 1972; Milyavsky et al., 2020), material wealth, beauty or knowledge/wisdom, honor (see Gelfand et al., 2015),

or indeed membership in a dominant majority defined, for instance, by race, ethnicity, or gender. A significance-lending value need not be a *moral* value. Beauty, material worth, or power do not represent standards of morality, nor do race, gender, or ethnicity. However, as the thriving cosmetics industry, economic competition, supercharged political arenas as well as systemic racism or sexism in contemporary societies amply attest, they typically bestow significance.

Different groups may privilege different values over others. Accordingly, different actions or attributes may earn individuals more or less significance in different social contexts. To the extent that one's sense of significance is embedded in the shared reality of one's group, a shift from one group to another may occasion wide swings in one's feelings of self-worth. Stories of immigrants and refugees abound with examples of individuals who, once highly respected in their "old country," lost much of their social and professional standing, and their attendant sense of significance, on relocation to the host culture (Amir, 2010; Nguyen, 2018). Viktor Frankl's harrowing tales from Nazi concentration camps (Frankl, 1946/2006) recounted striking instances of venerated intellectuals, wealthy businessmen, or renowned artists who were stripped of their former honor and reduced into shivering inmates teetering on the verge of inhumanity.⁹

Thus, significance gains and losses could take place both *within* an evaluative context through an individual's (behavior or attributes) matching—or failing to match—a stable set of values or *between* evaluative contexts, in which the same behavior or attributes earn more or less significance depending on the context, that is, on the specific values hailed therein.

The "how" of significance quest: needs, narratives, and networks working together

For the bestowal of significance to occur, behaviors/attributes must be identified that match a cherished value. Such identification is depicted in the cultural narrative (including cultural norms and worldviews) upheld by a given social network. An individual in whom the need for significance was activated and who treats a given social network as a reference group (Merton & Kitt, 1950) is guided by its narrative in carrying out a significance-meriting action. In the individual's eyes, such action is a means to the end of significance.

The network element serves a dual function: It validates the narrative and rewards by status and prestige those who represent it or live up to its values (Anderson et al., 2015; Bendersky & Pai, 2018; Buss et al., 2020; Levine & Kruglanski, 2021). Networks jealously guard

their narratives and protect their fundamental (sacred) values. They reject those who stray from the consensus (Allen & Levine, 1968, 1971; Kruglanski et al., 2006; Kruglanski & Webster, 1991; Schachter, 1951), “rally around the flag” when their narrative is challenged (Allen, 1975; Moscovici, 1985), and/or develop mechanisms designed to isolate them from potential challenges (Bittner, 1963; Coser, 1954, 1967; Kanter, 1968; Wilson, 1959a, 1959b).

It is of interest to point out that the need, narrative, and network elements are only partially independent. Specifically, individual characteristics (e.g., need for cognitive closure, self-uncertainty) may attune individuals to particular (e.g., “black and white) narratives” (see Jost et al., 2003) and predispose them to join particular networks (Hogg, 2012; Kruglanski et al., 2006).

Behavioral consequences

When the need for significance is activated at a magnitude that exceeds other current concerns, its satisfaction becomes a priority (Kruglanski, Chernikova, et al., 2014; Kruglanski et al., 2021). It is then translated into a specific goal that drives behavior aimed at significance attainment. Identification of the specific goal (e.g., defeating the enemy militarily, toppling the government, winning a beauty contest, or becoming a company’s CEO) and the behavioral means assumed to serve it (enlisting in the Marine Corps, volunteering for a suicide mission, going on a diet, or networking with members of the board) are conveyed in the narrative to which the individual subscribes and that is part and parcel of his or her shared reality (Higgins, 2019).

Individuals often devote extreme effort and engage in acts of extreme self-denial in their quest for significance (Kruglanski et al., 2021). Offers for reaching pinnacles of significance *quickly* (e.g., the various “get-rich-quick schemes,” or admission to paradise through an act suicidal terrorism; Webber, Chernikova, et al., 2018) can be highly alluring and motivate extreme actions (including martyrdom, heroism, or criminality) that involve the suppression/sacrifice of alternative considerations (see Kruglanski et al., 2021).

Affective consequences

The joy of significance. Individuals driven by the quest for significance should feel significant and pleased after exhibiting a commitment to a valued cause. In 2005, *TIME Magazine* correspondent Bobby Gosh interviewed Marwan Abu Abeida, a 20-year-old Iraqi militant and member of Abu Mussab al Zarqawi’s insurgent group (Attawhid), the precursor of the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS). After months of serving as a regular fighter,

Marwan volunteered to become a suicide bomber, and finally, after a long wait, he heard that he had made the list. By Marwan’s account, as he told Bobby Ghosh in an interview for *TIME*,

this day was the happiest in his life . . . he claimed to be ready to die, to be looking forward to it, and praying for a large number of American casualties. . . . His thoughts were occupied by the “final stage,” after a mission would be assigned to him. He hoped for an important one. (Kruglanski, Bélanger, & Gunaratna, 2019, pp. 122–123)

The burden of insignificance. A state in which no apparent path to significance exists may be hard to bear and even lead to suicide. In Emile Durkheim’s (1897) classic work *Le Suicide*, *anomic suicide* occurs in the absence of societal norms and definitions of legitimate aspirations, and *egoistic suicide* occurs when one feels untethered from society and thus deprived of the acceptance that begets significance.

Economists Case and Deaton (2020) commented on the rapidly rising suicide rates among middle-aged White Americans. They tied it to the falling living standards among less educated Americans, prompting what we would call a precipitous loss of significance. As the authors noted:

Simple falling [of] material standards cannot by itself account for what has happened. . . . Jobs that come with the lower wages do not bring the sense of pride that can come with being part of a successful enterprise. . . . Jobs are not just the source of money. . . . It is the loss of meaning, of dignity, of pride, and of self respect . . . that brings on despair, not just or even primarily the loss of money. (pp. 7–8)

Seconding Durkheim, Case and Deaton (2020) concluded that “suicide happens when society fails to provide . . . its members with the framework within which they can live dignified and meaningful lives” (p. 8).¹⁰

Understanding the dynamics of significance quest draws on two levels of analysis: a general theory of motivation pertaining to properties/processes that characterize any motivated activity (see Kruglanski et al., 2002) and an elucidation of the psychological meaning of significance, its origins, and its consequences.

As with other motivations, the quest for significance can be chronic or acute, representing a relatively stable “trait” or a situationally induced “state.” As with other motivations, the quest for significance can also be activated by processes of deprivation (or significance loss) or incentivization (opportunity for significance gain).

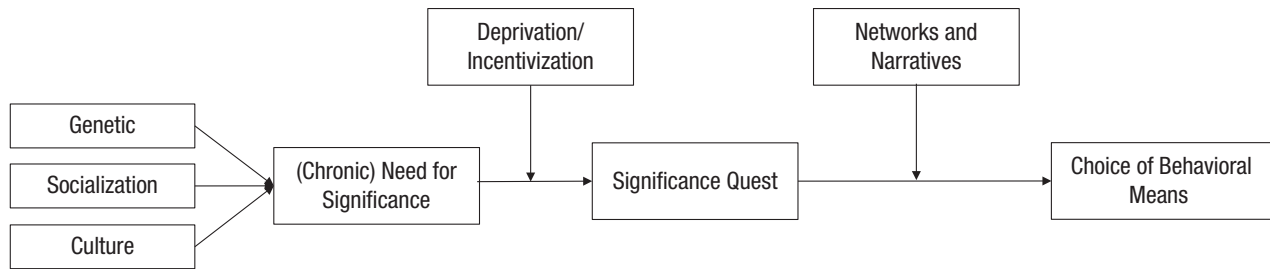


Fig. 1. The dynamics of significance quest.

Once activated at a magnitude above other current concerns, the quest for significance motivates action aimed at significance attainment. Such action constitutes a means to the end of significance (Kruglanski et al., 2002). Several such equifinal means may be identified, and a failure to attain significance by one means may prompt the switching to another means (Kruglanski et al., 2002).

Although it is governed in part by general motivational principles, the quest for significance represents a special motivation stemming from a preeminent social need. Thus, the quest for significance is satisfied by evidence of one's devotion to, or personification of, an important social value held in high regard by the individual's social network or reference group (Merton & Kitt, 1950). Such evidence is contained in the group's narrative that identifies given actions or attributes as significance-bestowing. Successful realization of a significance-meriting action, or a significance-affording attribute, induces the feelings of social worth and pride, whereas a failure to attain significance induces a sense of shame, humiliation, and meaninglessness.

The basic ideas and implications of our SQT are graphically represented in Figure 1 and summarized in a set of quasiformal statements listed next.

Premises and Hypotheses

Premise 1 (the need for significance): Humans have a basic need to have social worth and to matter to others. We call this need the need for significance.

Premise 2: The need for significance is satisfied by the sense of realizing, or matching, a value cherished by the community/culture whose standards one internalized.

Premise 3: Different groups may cherish different values (although some values, such as the group's survival and security, may be common across groups).

Corollary 1 (to Premise 2): People can attain or fail to attain significance (a) through their individual

actions/attributes that match an internalized value and (b) through their group's actions/attributes that do so.

Corollary 2 (to Premise 1): The need for significance may be *acute*, that is, situationally induced (i.e., a matter of "state"), or *chronic*, representing an enduring personality characteristic (i.e., a "trait").

Hypothesis 1a (from Premise 1 and Corollaries 1 and 2): The need for significance may be activated by a loss of significance or a threat of loss (i.e., maintenance of nonloss) to the individual or his or her group (i.e., to the individual's social identity).

Hypothesis 1b (from Premise 1 and Corollaries 1 and 2): The need for significance may be activated by an opportunity for significance gain afforded to the individual or his or her group.¹¹

Hypothesis 1c (from Premise 1 and Corollaries 1 and 2): The need for significance constitutes a dimension of stable individual differences.

Hypothesis 2 (from Premises 1 and 2): Individuals' quest for significance will prompt their endorsement of values cherished by their group.

Hypothesis 3 (from Premises 1–3): Significance-driven actions will be guided by narratives endorsed by the individual's social networks that portray those actions as ways of realizing the group's values.

Premise 4: The need for significance may be gratified via different behaviors matching/expressing different cherished values and/or by different (equifinal) behaviors matching/expressing the same cherished value.¹²

Hypothesis 4 (from Premise 4): In case a given behavior failed to result in gratification of the need for significance, other value-driven behaviors will be undertaken for that purpose.

Hypothesis 5a (from Premises 1 and 2 and Corollary 1): To the extent that one internalized the values cherished in a given social milieu, matching/expressing those values will result in feelings of significance and pride.

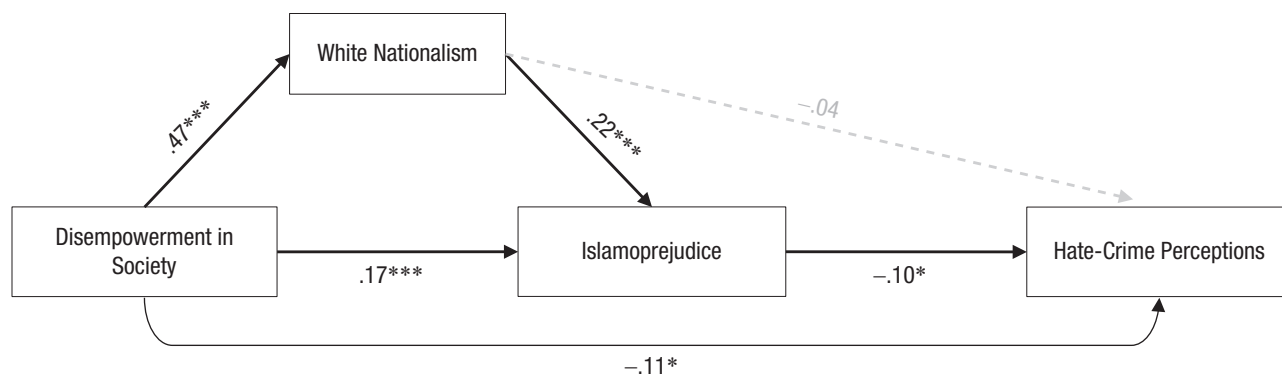


Fig. 2. Christchurch study standardized parameter estimates. Asterisks indicate significant paths ($*p < .05$. $***p < .001$). Reproduced from Leander, N. P., Kreienkamp, J., Agostini, M., Stroebe, W., Gordijn, E. H., & Kruglanski, A. W. (2020). Biased hate crime perceptions can reveal supremacist sympathies. *Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences*, *117*(32), 19072–19079.

Hypothesis 5b (from Premises 1 and 2 and Corollary 1): To the extent that one internalized the values cherished in a given social milieu, failing to match/express those values will result in feelings of insignificance and humiliation.

Hypothesis 6 (from Premises 2 and 3): An attribute or behavior may earn an individual a given degree of significance in one social context and a different degree of significance (more or less) in a social context committed to different values.

The Empirical Base

The foregoing statements concerning the antecedents and consequences of the quest for significance are supported by extensive bodies of empirical research.

Activating the quest

Hypothesis 1a: significance loss. Hypothesis 1a posits that the need for significance may be activated by a loss of significance suffered by the individual or the individual's group. Considerable evidence supports this hypothesis. It consists primarily of studies that measured or manipulated individuals' sense of lost significance and examined how this loss is related to their significance-oriented actions.

Correlational evidence. In field research carried out with detained members of a Sri Lankan terrorist organization we found that their sense of lowered significance was significantly correlated with their endorsement of a violent struggle against the Sinhalese majority, their perceived oppressors. Feelings of lowered significance among suspected Islamic militants from the Abu Sayyaf Group held in a Philippine jail (Kruglanski et al., 2016) were also related to their commitment to fundamentalist religious

values whose realization is likely to be significance-enhancing. A study carried out with Filipino, Sri Lankan, and American samples (Webber, Babush, et al., 2018, Study 3) also found that perceptions of personal failure were related to increased support for extremism of both Islamist and general (support for violence) varieties.

Leander, Agostini, et al. (2020) assessed whether the prospects of future unemployment increased compliance with violent narratives about masculine power in the context of assertive gun use. Stronger expectations of future job loss increased the shooting of *unarmed* targets in particular, wherein the decision to shoot may have been more ambiguous and hence susceptible to motivational biases, consistent with the current theory.¹³ Such behavior was mainly observed among men who endorsed the masculinity narrative. This is consistent with the idea that expected future significance loss can suffice to motivate individuals to embrace the narratives of their network.

Leander, Kreienkamp, et al. (2020) asked Whites in New Zealand and the United States what motivated two mass shootings perpetrated by avowed White supremacists. Disempowered Whites not only reported higher endorsement of ethnonationalism and prejudice against the victim groups but also expressed *less certainty* the gunmen were indeed motivated by hatred or prejudice. This finding supports our theory and is consistent with the idea that members of a dominant majority often sympathize with a majority perpetrator's prejudicial cause (Craig, 2002; Petrosino, 1999). Downplaying hate crimes can thus be a normative means of defending the majority's significance (see Fig. 2).

Leander and colleagues (2019) examined whether heightened salience of mass shootings increased the readiness to shoot other people for individuals who feel frustrated and disempowered. U.S. gun owners were studied in the immediate wakes of several shootings.

Across studies, gun-owners' failures and frustrations interacted with their psychological closeness to the given shooting to augment perceptions that guns are means of personal empowerment as well as increase their willingness to draw or discharge their firearms in various acts of community vigilantism. Among disempowered gun owners, the mass shootings inspired or legitimized the use of guns to pursue individual empowerment and significance—albeit in a normative manner consistent with the modern gun-culture narrative.

Jasko and colleagues (2017) analyzed a group of individuals who have committed ideologically motivated crimes in the United States. They showed that when individuals experienced failure at work, when they were rejected in social relationships, or when they were victims of abuse they were more likely to resort to violence to pursue their ideological goals (of the Far Right, Far Left, and Islamist varieties). In other words, the stronger their quest for significance occasioned by a *significance loss*, the more extreme their commitment to their ideology and the readiness to commit violence on its behalf.

Experimental evidence. Although the foregoing studies tap important real-world phenomena, they are in part or whole correlational and hence of limited ability in furnishing unambiguous evidence about causality. It is therefore important to examine experimental evidence concerning the impact of significance loss on the quest for significance as expressed by enhanced commitment to individuals' values.

In one study (Orehek & Kruglanski, 2018, Study 4), experienced success or failure on an experimental task (made to appear important) and their sense of significance were measured via the Meaning in Life Questionnaire (Steger et al., 2006). Participants who experienced failure self-identified as more interdependent (vs. independent) than participants in the "success" condition. These findings suggest that a loss of significance induced by failure evokes individuals' quest for significance fulfilled by their sense of social connectedness (with significant others). These findings offer strong support for Hypothesis 1a.

In another experimental study (Webber, Babush, et al., 2018, Study 4), U.S. university students were asked to think back to a time when they were humiliated. The authors found that participants in the loss-of-significance (vs. control) condition endorsed their (previously identified) political orientation more strongly. Those who self-identified as Democrats endorsed extreme Democratic values more strongly, and those who self-identified as Republicans identified more strongly with extreme Republican values.

Belanger and colleagues (2019) induced a sense of sexual guilt in religious participants and found that participants in the significance-loss condition scored significantly higher on a self-sacrifice scale (Bélanger et al., 2014). These findings attest that a temporary loss of significance can be situationally induced, which then prompts attempts at significance restoration.

Leander, Agostini, et al. (2020) hypothesized that differences in higher education may reflect differences in individuals' social context, in which violence-related values are communicated and shared. College education negatively predicts attitudes toward, for instance, expansive gun-use rights (Quinnipiac University Poll, 2013), the death penalty (Oliphant, 2018), military intervention in the Middle East (Pew Research Center, 2003), and authoritarian aggression (Carvacho et al., 2013). In this vein, Leander, Agostini, et al. (2020) observed across multiple experiments that experimentally thwarted goals (operationalizing failure or significance loss) interacted with education level to predict a heightened endorsement of guns and war by participants without a college education but not for those with a college education.

Hypothesis 1b: significance gain. It is relatively easy to imagine circumstances in which deficit or deprivation spurs individuals to action. In fact, the vast literature on extremism, terrorism, and rebellion (for a review, see Kruglanski, Bélanger, & Gunaratna, 2019) emphasizes, almost exclusively, the sense of grievance and humiliation (i.e., loss of significance that incites violence aimed at significance restoration). According to the SQT, however, one may also be stirred to action by the allure of a considerable significance gain, the prospect of having real worth meriting respect and admiration (see also Crocker & Park, 2004).

There is experimental evidence that exposure to successful role models and/or generally admired figures has inspirational powers that move individuals to pursue lofty goals. In this vein, Lockwood and Kunda (1997, 1999) carried out several studies in which exposure to superstars in one's domain of endeavor provoked self-enhancement and inspiration to reach high levels of achievement in that domain, made now to appear more attainable.

Hasbrouck (2020) asked participants to name a personal hero and to write a short paragraph describing how that person inspired them. Participants then completed an interpolated task and responded to a multi-item scale capturing the desire for significance (Quest for Significance Scale [QFSS]; Molinaro, Elster et al., 2021). Sample items in the scale include statements such as "I wish I could be more respected," "I wish I

meant more to other people,” and “I wish other people thought I were significant.”

Compared with participants in the control condition, participants in the personal-hero condition reported a significantly higher desire for significance. In a yet different manifestation of the inspirational powers of significance gain, Willer (2009, Study 4) found that participants who received status for their contributions to the group subsequently increased their contributions and formed a more positive impression of the group. In another relevant study (Molinario, Elster, et al., 2021), participants read a bogus newspaper article that described how the need for doing something important and meaningful leads to success in several life domains. Participants then responded to the QFSS. It was found that participants in the need-for-significance condition attained higher scores on the QFSS than those in the control condition. They also expressed greater readiness and intention to perform difficult prosocial and proenvironmental behaviors than did participants in the control condition.

Jasko et al. (2019) predicted that the more important the values embodied in a political movement would be to activists, the more personally significant they should feel when actively engaged in supporting its cause and, consequently, the greater should be their willingness to self-sacrifice and act for the cause in the future. These predictions were tested in six studies carried out in different social contexts, including samples that comprised labor activists, feminist activists, and environmental activists. The following results were replicated across all of the six studies. First, people who perceived the cause as more personally important were also more motivated to engage in peaceful actions on its behalf; personal significance gained by activists through their involvement in the cause partially accounted for this effect, which is consistent with the current theory. Moreover, individuals who engaged in radical and demanding forms of political behavior versus those exhibiting moderate and less demanding engagement experienced stronger significance gain. These findings again demonstrate the motivating properties of the opportunity for significance gain (through activist engagement).

Hypothesis 1c: individual differences in the quest for significance. We conceive of the quest for significance as a dynamic force that propels individuals to action. Although hardly anyone lacks this motivation (hardly anyone is indifferent to slights and affronts to one's dignity), persons may differ in its magnitude—some questing for significance and dignity more than others. Our six-item QFSS (Molinario, Elster et al., 2021) was shown to have a robust single-factor structure, good internal consistency and test-retest reliability, and demonstrable convergent

and discriminant validity. As a motivation, the quest for significance denotes a striving for better outcomes and a relative dissatisfaction with the status quo. Accordingly, the QFSS was negatively correlated with life satisfaction, self-esteem, and the presence of meaning and purpose in life. The dissatisfaction tapped by the quest for significance is also reflected by positive correlations with measures of negative feelings such as depression, fear of humiliation, cumulative humiliation, and loss of significance. Finally, the scale is positively correlated with measures that tap striving for significance gain, greatness, and distinction, such as ambition as well as individual and collective narcissism. These findings are consistent with the notion that the quest for significance represents a motivational dimension on which individuals stably differ.

Embracing the ideological narrative

Hypothesis 2 of the SQT states that activation of the need for significance will occasion an enhanced endorsement of the values of one's group/culture. Hasbrouck (2020) found that the quest for significance, measured as an individual difference variable, was positively correlated with the individual's highest ranked moral foundation (Graham et al., 2009), in support of this hypothesis. In addition, in a sample of liberals, the quest for significance was positively correlated with the two values of greatest importance to liberals: harm and fairness (Graham et al., 2009). In another study, Molinario, Jasko et al. (2020) found that individual-difference measures of the quest for significance were positively related to populist values for both Italian and American samples.

Hypothesis 3 states that significance-motivated actions will be guided by narratives endorsed by the individual's networks. The narrative and network elements are tightly interwoven in that the narrative constitutes a shared reality (Higgins, 2019) within the individual's reference group.

Religious values. Religious narratives are one example of significance bestowal through value-promoting actions. In the United States, Christian nationalism promotes the narrative that the United States is fundamentally a Christian nation and sacralizes right-wing politics aimed at codifying Christianity as the national religion (Whitehead, Schnabel, & Perry, 2018). Endorsement of Christian nationalism strongly predicted voting for Trump (Whitehead, Perry, & Baker, 2018), as well as disregard for the behavioral-health measures meant to mitigate the COVID-19 pandemic (Perry et al., 2020).

In a test of the current theory, a study examined whether significance loss predicts allegiance to Christian nationalism and endorsement of its corresponding prejudicial narratives. A psychological survey of 380 U.S.

adults, conducted in the wake of the 2018 Pittsburgh synagogue shooting, supported a serial mediation model in which a frustrated sense of disempowerment (significance loss) predicted increased embracement of the Christian nationalist movement (network), which in turn predicted antisemitism (narrative) and reduced recognition of hate crimes (Leander, Kreienkamp, et al, 2020).

Sacred values. In an influential analysis of violent extremists' motivation, the anthropologist Scott Atran highlighted the notion of values that are sacred for the group and that therefore justify the greatest sacrifices on their behalf. According to his "devoted-actor" model (Atran, 2021), individuals dedicated to their group's sacred values are ready to make extreme sacrifices on their behalf, especially if they are "fused" with the group (i.e., view their personal identity as isomorphic with the group; Atran, 2010, 2016; Gómez et al., 2017; Swann et al., 2010). Consistent with the current logic, Atran (2021) views sacred values as a moral imperative with deep evolutionary roots. In this vein, Darwin (1871) saw virtues of "morality . . . patriotism, fidelity, obedience, courage, and sympathy" as products of "natural selection" (pp. 166). According to Atran (2021), Darwin "conjectured that groups populated by heroes and martyrs, better endowed with such virtues, would dominate in history's unrelenting competition for survival" (p. 479).

Extensive field and laboratory research supports the devoted-actor model and attests to individuals' "will to fight and die" for sacred values (Atran, 2021). From the current perspective, Atran's work refers to the value-laden narrative that grants worth and significance to individuals who exhibit devotion and commitment to it, as proven by their readiness to make extreme sacrifices in its behalf.

Frustration-affirmation

Historically, the frustration of needs was generally assumed to motivate violence as a part of a regressive, antisocial response. This notion has been articulated as the *frustration-aggression* hypothesis (Berkowitz, 1969; Dollard et al., 1939; Miller, 1941). However, Leander, Agostini, et al. (2020) obtained evidence for a *frustration-affirmation* perspective on proviolent responses to thwarted goals: When the goal frustration pertains to socially symbolic concerns that bear on one's significance, it might increase compliance with the salient narratives or norms of one's network, whether proviolence or antiviolence, as part of an attempt to affirm those values and hence reaffirm one's significance.

In an experiment designed to examine this idea, a sample of Dutch adults was asked to first rate the extent to which their network of family and friends valued

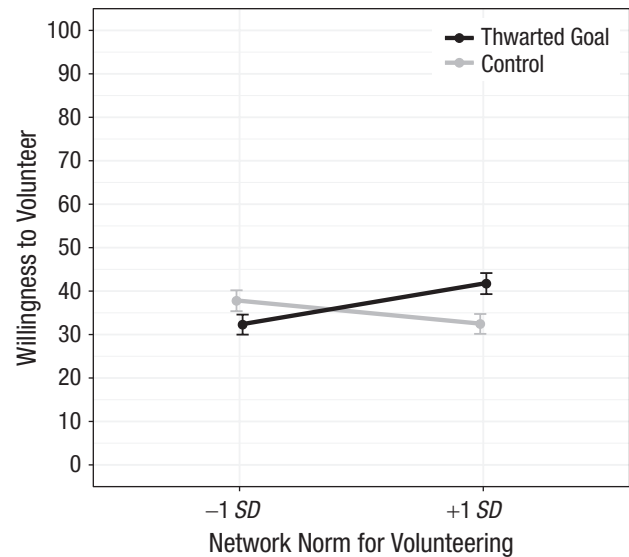


Fig. 3. Willingness to volunteer in refugee-support activities as a function of a goal-thwarting condition and perceived social norms to volunteer. Copyright © 2020 by the American Psychological Association. Reproduced with permission from Leander, N. P., Agostini, M., Stroebe, W., Kreienkamp, J., Spears, R., Kuppens, T., Van Zomeren, M., Otten, S., & Kruglanski, A. W. (2020). Frustration-affirmation? Thwarted goals motivate compliance with social norms for violence and nonviolence. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, 119(2), 249–271. <https://doi.org/10.1037/pspa0000190>

volunteering behavior. Next, participants were experimentally goal-thwarted (or not). Results indicated a two-way interaction such that goal-thwarted individuals reported the highest volunteering behavior (for refugee-support activities) when their network valued volunteering. This suggests that thwarted goals do not necessarily motivate aggressive impulses or out-group hostility; rather, thwarting (and the loss of significance it implies) increases compliance with the perceived values of individuals' network, which may include nonviolent, charitable behavior (see Fig. 3).

The logic of the current theory suggests that individuals who typically support nonviolence would reverse their normal position when frustrated and when presented with a proviolence norm allegedly endorsed by their network. These notions were supported by an experiment by Leander, Agostini, et al. (2020) in which U.S. adults¹⁴ were either goal-thwarted or not, after which they read about the Syrian Civil War and ISIS as well as the prospect for U.S. military intervention in Syria. Half the participants read that other college-educated Americans generally opposed such military intervention; the other half read that college-educated Americans generally supported military intervention. Participants presented with the antiviolence norms were more likely to voice an antiviolence sentiment when they were goal-frustrated (vs. nonfrustrated), whereas participants presented with

the proviolence norm were more likely to voice a proviolence sentiment when they were frustrated (vs. nonfrustrated).

In summary, widely different narratives can be functionally equivalent in relation to the quest for significance. They serve as equifinal means to the same end: identifying ways to gain or regain significance. Needless to say, functional equivalence does not imply moral equivalence. Whereas some narratives may justify horrors and atrocities against innocents, others may preach love and compassion toward fellow human beings. That they serve the same psychological end does not make them equal in other ways.

Compensatory significance

Self-affirmation. Hypothesis 4 of the SQT states that should a behavior or an attribute fail to gratify the need for significance, other behavioral means will be undertaken for that purpose. A plethora of evidence for this proposition pertains to cases in which an individual's significance was reduced or threatened in some way, which then prompted a substitute action aimed at significance restoration.

The substitutability of ways in which one's sense of significance is attained is aptly illustrated by the voluminous research on the phenomenon of self-affirmation and self-completion (see Sherman & Cohen, 2006; Steele, 1998; Wicklund & Gollwitzer, 1981). In a comprehensive essay entitled "The Psychology of Self-Defense," Sherman and Cohen (2006) stated the fundamental premise of self-affirmation theory, namely that "people are motivated to maintain the integrity of the self . . . defined as the sense that, on the whole, one is a good and appropriate person . . . given the cultural norms and demands within that culture" (p. 7). This postulate is highly resonant with the current assumption of the quest for significance as a fundamental human motivation.

Research on the topic typically uses a paradigm in which participants' self-concept is challenged in some way, consistent with the notion of self-affirmation as a "psychological defense." This is accomplished either by having participants confront someone whose worldview clashes with their own, making salient the participants' counterattitudinal behavior, or a negative stereotype of the participants' group (e.g., gender, ethnicity, or race). Either before such confrontation or after it, the participants are offered (or not) an opportunity to affirm an important value. The typical finding is that individuals become less defensive and more open-minded after self-affirmation with respect to the challenging information they are presented with (for a review, see Sherman & Cohen, 2006).

Work on the self-affirmation paradigm yields the following SQT-consistent conclusions: A threat to one's sense of significance elicits behavior aimed at reasserting one's significance, the sense of significance depends on one's demonstrable commitment to important cultural values (it is such a commitment that defines one as worthy and deserving of respect), and a loss of significance by failure to live up to a given norm or standard can be compensated for by demonstrating one's dedication to another norm or standard.

It is important to note that the self-affirmation paradigm is one of self-defense. It depicts reactions to a loss of significance. In contrast, the SQT also includes the case of significance gain (i.e., conditions in which the opportunity to boost one's sense of significance motivated value-driven behavior).

Self-uncertainty. Conceptually akin to the work on self-affirmation are the several research programs on *personal* or *self-uncertainty* (e.g., Hogg, 2012; McGregor & Marigold, 2003; van den Bos & Loseman, 2012). Essentially, self-uncertainty refers to self-doubt, that is, a threat to a sense of self-worth, or what we call the sense of significance. In this vein, McGregor and Marigold (2003, Study 3) found that inductions of self-uncertainty motivate enhanced conviction on socially important issues, and Hogg (2012) described research in which self-uncertainty increased the appeal of extreme groups whose tight consensus and clear norms offer a way to restore one's self-assurance and self-respect. Again, the self-uncertainty paradigm pertains to significance loss in particular and does not address the motivating properties of a possible significance gain.

Terror management. Another significant body of work about the threat of significance loss is represented by research guided by the terror-management theory (TMT; e.g., Solomon et al., 1991). Like the current theory, the TMT stresses the relation between self-esteem (i.e., feelings of self-worth or significance) and one's cultural narrative (cultural worldview in TMT terms). It is noteworthy that the TMT ties self-esteem to the fear of death exclusively. Indeed, hundreds of studies have suggested that mortality-salience manipulations promote worldview defense, which in turn boosts individuals' self-esteem (for a review, see Greenberg et al., 2014). However, although mortality salience may well threaten a loss of significance (the dread of being but a "speck of dust in an uncaring universe"), we posit that the loss of significance (e.g., because of one's status as a disrespected minority or failure to live up to one's group's standards in various domains) can be occasioned by concerns other than the fear of death specifically. Moreover, as noted earlier, SQT suggests that the quest for significance can

be *promotive* rather than merely *preventive* (see Higgins, 2012) and can be activated by an opportunity for significance gain rather than merely by a significance loss.

Matching/mismatching the evaluative context

Within-context effects. According to Hypothesis 5a of the SQT, matching/expressing a value cherished in one's social group/culture will result in feelings of significance and pride. In support of this hypothesis, research guided by the self-affirmation theory (Steele, 1988) showed that engagement in activities that enable one to express personally important values leads to increased self-esteem (e.g., Cohen et al., 2000; Fein & Spencer, 1997).

Jasko et al. (2019, Study 4) compared radical and moderate actions on behalf of a cause. Namely, it compared Polish proenvironmental activists who carried out extreme actions aimed at preventing the government from logging a forest (setting up camp in the forest, chaining themselves to the logging machines) to moderate activists who merely engaged in demonstrations, donated money for the cause, and so on. It was found that the extreme (vs. moderate) activists were more committed to the cause, experienced greater significance gain (pride, sense of meaning), and were more motivated to self-sacrifice for the protest and to engage in radical actions for the cause.

Our Hypothesis 5b states that the failure to match/express a value cherished in a given social context results in feelings of insignificance and humiliation. Ample findings from research on stigma (e.g., Link & Phelan, 2001; Major & O'Brien, 2005; Pachankis et al., 2018), exclusion, rejection, and ostracism (e.g., Baumeister et al., 2002; DeWall & Bushman, 2011; Leary, 1990; K. D. Williams, 2007; K. D. Williams & Nida, 2011) support this hypothesis. Crocker et al. (1998) defined stigmatization as the exclusion or rejection of a person when that person possesses (or is thought to possess) "some attribute or characteristic that conveys a social identity that is devalued in a particular social context" (p. 505). The attribute could pertain to the aesthetic realm, the ethical realm, or the social realm—or what Goffman (1963) referred to as the "abomination of the body," "blemishes of character," and "tribal stigma," respectively. Whereas the ultimate impact of being stigmatized on individuals' stable self-esteem may vary (Major & O'Brien, 2005), the experience of social pain occasioned by exclusion and rejection appears to be universal (Baumeister, 2002).

Between-context effects. Hypothesis 6 of the SQT states that an attribute or behavior that may earn a given degree of significance in one social context may earn a

different degree of significance (more or less) in a social context committed to different values. A plethora of evidence across different lines of psychological research supports this proposition.

For instance, Rosenberg (1965) reported that high school students from minority ethnic groups who lived in ethnically mixed neighborhoods had lower self-esteem than minority students in ethnically homogeneous neighborhoods. Likewise, Clark and Clark (1939) found that Black children attending integrated Northern schools exhibited greater self-hatred than those in segregated Southern classrooms. Presumably, the attributes of minority individuals better fitted the norm in ethnically homogeneous contexts than in heterogeneous contexts (see also Melnick, 2020).

In the organizational realm, Schneider (1987) proposed the attraction-selection-attrition (ASA) model to explain how organizations evolve toward psychological homogeneity. Individuals whose values and/or personality do not fit those of the organization do not feel comfortable in it and ultimately leave or are asked to leave. Research has shown that job applicants self-select into organizations on the basis of people-organization fit (e.g., Cable & Judge, 1996; Tom, 1971) and that interviewers use people-organization fit when evaluating and hiring job applicants (Cable & Judge, 1996; Rynes & Gerhart, 1990), consistent with the ASA framework.

Weisbuch et al. (2009) hypothesized that self-esteem is a gauge of perceived social value that fluctuates as a function of the degree to which one feels appreciated by those around him or her (consistent with the sociometer model; see Leary and Baumeister, 2000). They carried out an experimental study in which women of various weights interacted with an experimenter who wore a shirt celebrating heavy bodies (i.e., "everyBODY is beautiful"). A week later, heavysset women reported higher self-esteem when they interacted with the same experimenter than when they interacted with a different experimenter (even though both experimenters wore plain, white T-shirts at the second encounter).

Harter and Whitesell (2003, Study A) examined students' feelings of global self-worth during the transition from high school to college. Those for whom self-worth decreased during their freshman year experienced a decrease of perceived approval from significant others, whereas those whose self-worth increased between high school and college reported increases in perceived approval from significant others. Whereas the exact reasons for these shifts in approval are not clear, it seems plausible that they stemmed at least in part from a differential fit between the student's attributes and the values hailed in the high school versus college contexts.

Finally, Horberg and Chen (2010) carried out three experimental studies showing that activating a mental representation of a significant other (father) with whom the participant desired closeness led the participant to (a) experience a shift in *contingencies of self-worth* (Crocker et al., 2003) toward domains that the significant other deemed important (Study 1), (b) experience self-worth increases or decreases following success or failure in a domain that the significant other (whose representation was activated) cared about (Study 2), and (c) experience a sense of lowered self-worth after thinking about a failure in a domain that the significant other cared about (Study 3). Similar findings were reported by Reznik and Andersen (2007) and Shah (2003).

General Discussion

The SQT suggests that a plethora of motivational constructs, such as achievement motivation, competence motivation, status cravings, rejection sensitivity, self-enhancement motivation, the need to belong, the need for meaning, the need for inclusion, the need for acceptance by others (belonging), and the fear of death (among others), share a fundamental commonality. They all touch in different ways on the human desire to feel that they matter, have social worth, and hence are “significant.”

Different research programs in social psychology also address different ways in which the quest for significance may be aroused, for instance, via exclusion, rejection, dissonance induction, failure, discrimination, self-uncertainty, and mortality salience. We suggest that although they go by different names and are based on different procedures, their common effect is inducing in participants a sense of reduced significance as a person.

Moreover, different research programs have alluded to the *significance-restoring* effect of the affirmation of one’s commitment to important societal values. Terror management theorists discussed in this vein what they referred to as the worldview defense (e.g., Greenberg et al., 2008) as a response to (the threat to one’s sense of significance occasioned by) mortality salience, and self-affirmation theorists (Sherman & Cohen, 2006, Steele, 1998) referred to the process of asserting the importance of one’s cherished values as defense against the “threats to self integrity [occasioned by] setbacks and disappointments of daily life” (Sherman & Cohen, 2006, p. 185). Likewise, McGregor’s identity-consolidation theory suggests that an important way in which people cope with the threats resulting from personal uncertainty is “compensatory conviction about value relevant topics” (McGregor & Marigold, 2003, p. 839). Although

called different names and studied via different research paradigms, at the core all of these phenomena appear to tap the same functional process.

Integration

The SQT combines prior insights in two ways roughly amounting to *intra-* and *intercategory* integrations. The former type of integration refers to identifying the functional common denominator of currently unconnected concepts. As noted above, different motivational constructs (achievement, status, competence, self-uncertainty, the dread of mortality) addressed in unrelated research all point to the same fundamental need to matter or have personal significance. And the same applies to the disparate constructs functionally representing significance attainment/restoration (i.e., self-affirmation, worldview defense, etc.). Such convergence offers theoretical parsimony as well as generalizability. Closely related theories need not be seen as competing but rather as complementary, with different models reflecting the different manifestations of the same psychological process across contexts. Indeed, there is value in identifying a common gist shared by multiple phenomena and affording a theory of expanded empirical content (Popper, 1972).

The intercategory integration that the SQT offers refers to the concatenation of the need, narrative, and network classes that in the case of significance concerns function jointly in affording need satisfaction. Let us explain. In the case of biological needs such as hunger or thirst, the connection between the end and the means is hardwired and innate. No one needs to be told specifically to eat when hungry or to drink when thirsty. But the quest for significance is quintessentially social. And ways of satisfying it are distinctly prescribed by, and unique to, the society/culture whose shared reality one has internalized (see Cooley, 1922; Mead, 1934). In other words, what constitutes achievement, competence, status, effectiveness, and so on completely depends on the cultural narrative embraced by the specific network of which one is member and/or whose values one has internalized. Thus, when it comes to significance and mattering, the motivational (need), ideological (narrative), and social (network) elements are inextricably interwoven.

Clarification

The current theory explicates several aspects of the quest for significance that were, perhaps, not as explicit in prior formulations. A major such aspect concerns the activation of the significance quest. Whereas prior research stressed defensive processes against threats to one’s self-integrity (e.g., in theories of self-affirmation,

identity consolidation, terror management, or dissonance), the SQT elucidates that as with any motivation, the quest for significance can be activated by incentivization as well as deprivation. In other words, such a quest may be instilled by an opportunity for a considerable significance gain rather than by mere significance loss or threat of loss. What matters is the discrepancy between actual and desired states (Higgins, 1987, 1997). The discrepancy could exist between a current state of significance deprivation and the status quo ante or between the current status quo and an aspirational level of greater significance.

Moreover, whereas prior formulations stressed the restorative function of value affirmation, worldview defense, or identity consolidation, the SQT clarifies that individuals' self-worth is anchored in one's group's values to begin with. It is the values that individuals represent through their choices, actions, or attributes that lend them worth in their group's and in their own eyes. Living up to or embodying those values earns one worth and significance; failing to live up or represent them results in rejection, opprobrium, and failure and hence a lowered sense of significance and self-worth.

In addition, whereas prior work has typically stressed the endorsement of worldviews and expression of values, the current formulation highlights and empirically illustrates the considerable real-world consequences of the quest for significance. In previous sections, we reviewed evidence for the major role that the quest for significance may play in the radicalization and deradicalization of violent extremists, attitudes toward mass shooters, commission of ideological crimes, participation in political activism, and engagement in suicidal terrorism. Indeed, we view the human quest for significance as a major force in the course of world history and the destiny of nations.

Finally, the current theory elucidates how one's sense of significance may be subject to fluctuations within and between contexts. Within a sociocultural context one may succeed or fail in living up to its standards; in changing contexts one's felt significance may rise or fall depending on the fit between one's attributes and the new context's dominant values.

Implications

The SQT has both conceptual and empirical implications. Its major conceptual implication is the *wholistic* portrayal of significance quest that highlights the interlocking of needs, narratives, and networks in the production of social action. As implied earlier, the ubiquitous terms of "failure" and "success" may not be understood fully without understanding the need that propelled an act, the value embedding narrative that

guided it, and the actor's reference group or network that embraced the narrative and rewarded valued outcomes that the act may have produced.

The current theory also carries quantitative implications still awaiting exploration. Specifically, the degree to which a given outcome will produce a significance loss or gain should be a function of (a) the extent to which it matches or deviates from a given value, (b) the place of the latter in the value hierarchy of one's group's narrative (i.e., its relative importance), (c) the degree of the group's cohesion and consensus around the group's narrative in which that value hierarchy is embedded, and (d) the expected duration of the gain or loss. Furthermore, the emotional impact of the significance gain or loss should depend on the magnitude of the individual's significance quest and the degree of the loss or gain involved. Future work may fruitfully address these quantitative dimensions of significance-quest phenomena, thus enhancing the precision of their characterization.

Beyond the extensive body of empirical results that it integrates, the SQT offers a number of novel directions for further research. One such direction concerns the neglect of significance-quest activation via the incentive of significance gain. Future research could address this gap in knowledge and in this connection also investigate the propensities for *promotion* versus *prevention* (Higgins, 1997, 2012) that may predispose individuals to be more responsive to significance losses versus gains in instilling the significance motivation. Particularly intriguing in this connection is the possibility that the influence of these two is actually asymmetrical. Specifically, the promotion orientation may instill a "unidirectional drive upward" (Festinger, 1954) that does not have a clear upper bound¹⁵ and thus should be capable of producing a more extreme ambition for significance (Kruglanski et al., 2021) than the prevention orientation that merely strives to restore the status quo.

Future research could also investigate whether there are personality variables that predispose individuals to be more responsive to the network versus the narrative elements in activating the quest for significance. For instance, one could surmise that variables such as conformism, self-monitoring, or dependence would privilege the influence of networks, whereas introversion would privilege that of narratives. Research could also investigate whether the degree to which goal frustration instigates aggressive responses varies as a function of the degree to which the frustrated goal related to a significance-affording value. This hypothesis assumes that aggression is often intended to reestablish one's dignity and honor (i.e., relative significance) and hence should be elicited to a greater extent in situations in which goal frustration had a clear significance-loss implication.

The role of culture and group type in promoting significance quest could be profitably studied. Tight cultures (Gelfand, 2019) that attach considerable importance to norms and values may encourage greater devotion to those values and hence a more pronounced pursuit of significance than loose cultures. Finally, socialization practices could be specifically studied in reference to their contributions to significance quest. Promotive socialization practices that stress the striving for positive ideals might produce a higher degree of significance striving than do preventive socialization practices that accentuate duties and obligations (see Higgins, 2012). In addition, socialization practices that strengthen the beliefs in growth, and hence the expectancy of positive outcomes, might contribute to significance strivings more so than practices that highlight fixed attributes and personal endowments (Dweck, 2006).

Coda

Like the mythological Proteus, the topic of significance quest keeps appearing in diverse forms and guises across multiple domains of social psychology. In the current article, we attempted to distill the implicit gist of heretofore unrelated research programs on this theme and outlined a theory that ties them together. SQT is consistent with large bodies of extant empirical findings as well as novel inquiries in multiple laboratory and field settings. It presents a wholistic approach to one of the most fundamental issues addressed in social thought over the centuries, the human need for significance and mattering, and suggests new directions and research paradigms for a further study of this essential quest.

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Notes

1. Recalling Hans Christian Andersen's fable about a swan who, living among ducks, was generally considered to be ugly but whose self-view changed after moving into the company of swans.
2. For example, Honneth's (1995) *The Struggle for Recognition* or R. R. Williams's (1992) *Recognition*.

3. For instance, according to Honneth (1995): "For Marx, who followed the working class's attempts at organizing from the closest distance, it was beyond doubt that the overarching aspirations of the emerging movement could be brought together under the concept of 'dignity'" (p. 160). And Sartre encountered, in Frantz Fanon's famous book *The Wretched of the Earth* (1963)—for which he wrote the introduction—an anticolonialist manifesto that attempted to explicate the experience of oppressed Black Africa by drawing directly on Hegel's doctrine of recognition.

4. In this vein, the U.S. Declaration of Independence from 1776 speaks of "a long train of abuses and usurpation" suffered by the colonists. Karl Marx and Frederick Engels (1848/1888, p. 22) asserted that "masses of laborers [are] . . . slaves of the bourgeois class, and of the bourgeois State" (p. 41). W. E. B. Du Bois stated in *The Soul of Black Folk* (1903/2021) that "daily the Negro is coming more and more to look upon law and justice, not as protecting safeguards, but as sources of humiliation and oppression" (Chapter 9, para. 16). In the "Manifesto of the Chinese People's Liberation Army," Mao Zedong (1947) wrote of a time when "our beloved fellow-countrymen will be able to live like human beings" (para. 10). And in "Letter From Birmingham Jail," Martin Luther King, Jr. (1963) wrote of the humiliation of Black Americans: "When your first name becomes 'nigger,' and your middle name becomes 'boy' (however old you are) and your last name becomes 'John,' and your wife and mother are never given the respected title 'Mrs.'" (para. 23).

5. According to Crocker and Park (2004), "the pursuit of self-esteem impedes the satisfaction of the needs for competence, relatedness, and autonomy, as well as the ability to self-regulate behavior" (p. 398).

6. Judge and Kammeyer-Mueller (2012) defined ambition as "persistent and generalized striving for success, attainment, and accomplishment" (p. 759). This definition clearly has commonalities with the need for significance, especially when this need is activated in the "significance-gain" conditions that we describe subsequently.

7. Presumably, not all ways of being effective confer social worth to the same degree. This should depend on the degree to which the value served by an activity is high on the value hierarchy of one's in-group and on the extent that it is widely shared within that group. Discovering a cure for a disease may be valued more and by more persons than caring for stray animals and therefore bring one more social worth or significance.

8. In addition to the value increment of significance produced by deprivation or incentivization, activation also depends on the *expectancy of attainment* (of significance). Regulatory focus theory, for instance, assumes that for prevention-focused individuals the elimination of losses is viewed as a necessity or ought that is rather insensitive to expectancy, and therefore reduced significance experienced as prevention failure does strengthen engagement. In contrast, for promotion-focused individuals success is experienced as an aspiration, or an ideal; hence, promotion-focused individuals are sensitive to expectancy, and it is found that reduced significance experienced as promotion failure weakens engagement (Higgins, 2012).

9. Frankl's own admirable maintenance of significance in the face of overwhelming adversity is one of the few exceptions that prove the rule. As Hannah Lévy-Hass, an inmate in the

Bergen Belsen camp, wrote in her diary, "What is most tragic is that they have succeeded, with their sadistic and depraved methods, in killing in us all sense of a human life in our past, all feeling of normal human beings endowed with a normal past, up to even the very consciousness of having existed at one time as human beings worthy of this name" (Lévy-Hass, 1944, para. 6).

10. The quality of the experienced emotions on significance gain or loss should vary in accordance with individuals' promotion or prevention orientation. In a promotion orientation significance gain should take the form of joyful pride and significance loss the form of dejected shame, whereas in a prevention orientation it should take the form of peaceful pride and agitated shame (Higgins, 2012).

11. Loss and the threat of loss (maintenance of nonloss; Hypothesis 1a) are particularly likely to motivate individuals who are prevention-focused, whereas the opportunity for significance gain (Hypothesis 1b) is particularly likely to motivate individuals who are promotion-focused (Higgins, 2012).

12. *Equifinality* refers to the situation in which a desired end state can be achieved via any one of multiple, disparate behaviors, all serving as substitutable means to the same end (Kruglanski et al., 2002; Shah & Kruglanski, 2003).

13. Although the original analysis included eight individuals who had already lost their jobs; excluding these participants did not alter the result of the study.

14. U.S. adults constitute a population that generally subscribes to anti-violence norms.

15. Intriguingly, an individual who achieved the pinnacle of social worth within a given group should then be motivated to maintain it and hence is bound to become (situationally) focused on prevention.

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